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Ollie North Was Right About Bureaucrats at The CIA and Pentagon

By Edward N. Luttwak

OLIVER NORTH WAS RIGHT about one thing: Today's cautious and bureaucratic intelligence officers are better at doing paperwork than at conducting operations.

Without for a moment doubting the colossal unwisdom of trading arms for hostages, it is important to recognize that the bureaucratic obstructionism and operational incapacity that frustrated North and his superiors would have been no less for purposes that were entirely wise, completely legal and fully authorized. Indeed, it was the lack of operational dynamism and flexibility at the Pentagon and the CIA that created the vacuum filled by the activist National Security Council staff, with its enterprising consultants and dubious outside collaborators.

North expressed his frustration in one computer message included in the Tower Commission's report, in which he complains that it would take the CIA two days to charter a perfectly ordinary transport aircraft for a perfectly ordinary flight. North praised one member of his NSC covert-operations network, retired major general Richard Secord, for his success in quickly chartering the needed aircraft. But that only shows the extent to which North himself accepted the slow procedures of the bureaucracy as a way of life.

Obtaining an airplane just isn't that complicated, and it certainly doesn't require the intervention of a Richard Secord. As any reader of Aviation Week & Space Technology knows, there are plenty of aircraft brokers with 24-hour service who can provide any ordinary aircraft at any ordinary airport in a matter of hours. The fact that the CIA should not have been involved at all in this misguided venture is quite irrelevant: It would still have taken two days for the CIA to produce the aircraft, even if the flight had been proper in every way.

The airplane example raises an obvious point: In responding to the Iran scandal, we shouldn't reinforce the bureaucratic inertia at the CIA and the Pentagon that drove North and his NSC colleagues to distraction, ultimately producing such disastrous results.

The government's bureaucratic problems involve more than mere inertia. There is a phenomenon these days that might be called "de-operationalization." As a result of myriad regulations quite unrelated to any constitutional safeguards, and perhaps because of the sort of people that low pay rates and good pensions nowadays attract in government service, a non-operational administrative mentality prevails even in government units that are supposed to be activist.

If a bucket is needed urgently by today's CIA or Pentagon, nobody will simply go out to the nearest hardware store and buy one—for fear of violating one of the countless purchasing regulations, and because any move so tangible and concrete creates the possibility of making an irrefutably obvious mistake. Instead, employing the reassuringly familiar tools of the administrator, the CIA officer will draft memos on the subject of buckets, leading in due course to the formation of a "bucket-purchasing committee," which will eventually recommend that a contract be awarded to a trading company run by some safe and trusted ex-CIA employees, who will in turn subcontract with a dealer to finally deliver the bucket.

In this climate of inaction, an activist NSC and a reliance on the agencies of foreign countries to do our government's business may come to seem not merely acceptable but positively necessary.

The problem isn't new with the Reagan administration. For years now, the United States has had to rely on allies—such as Britain and Israel—to perform all sorts of operational functions that were beyond its capacity—not because the United States lacked the resources, but because of the sheer difficulty of overcoming institutional rigidities and bureaucratic inertia within our intelligence agencies.

Consider our reliance on Britain's Secret Intelligence Service. The SIS, popularly known as MI6, has maintained a world-wide espionage and covert-action network even though there is no longer a world-wide British empire to protect. They have done so for a simple reason: by providing frequent help to the CIA, the SIS enhances Britain's bargaining power with successive American administrations at very little cost.

The SIS is actually very small and pathetically ill-equipped compared to the CIA. And yet when something must actually be done, its people seem to be ready to go out and do it, instead of holding more meetings about the subject. Invariably, all or most of the funding as well as technical equipment involved is American, while the British contribution is to supply "operators" who will actually operate. As one consequence, we end up sharing much more intelligence with Britain than with any other NATO ally. This may or may not be a good thing in itself, but it certainly causes acute resentment within NATO.

A more unfortunate result of relying on the British is that our own generally excellent security has more than once been compromised by Soviet penetrations of SIS and other British intelligence outfits, in a whole series of episodes from Kim Philby to Geoffrey Prime in the 1980s. The Brits make good spies, to be sure, but they also—alas—seem to make good double agents.

As for the Israelis, we can be certain that the readiness of Messrs. McFarlane and North to work with them on a matter as delicate as the Iran affair reflected a pattern of dependence that had developed since the early 1970s with an intelligence service smaller than the SIS—but which again has field operatives ready to get their hands dirty.

The point isn't that we should stop working with friendly intelligence services. But it is one thing to share for the common good the intelligence our allies can provide from their own varied sources, and quite another to tolerate a pattern of dependence—whereby we rely on others to supply field personnel for our own operations, so that our own people can stick to their preferred office work.

Another area of American operational incapacity is in rescuing hostages. The Tower Commission's report offered a glimpse of the problem. At one point, Lt. Col. North apparently thought he might soon know the exact place where one of the Lebanon hostages was being held. That, of course, created the possibility of a rescue. In the so-called "Delta Force," the United States has had, for years, a commando unit specifically trained for hostage rescues, indeed narrowly specialized for that one purpose.

But the Delta Force has a problem. Though manned by brave and dedicated men, and certainly with more lavish facilities and equipment than any of its counterparts in the Western world (such as the British SAS, the German GS-9 and the Israeli GSR), Delta has never actually rescued any hostage. Now, fi-

nally, one would have thought that its opportunity had come. But the message reproduced in the Tower report suggests that North doubted the possibility of going through channels to call upon Delta and contemplated the use of some Druze mercenaries recruited by Secord instead.

North obviously took it for granted that the Defense Department, the Joint Chiefs and the relevant commands would insist on elaborate and prolonged feasibility studies, exhaustive intelligence collection and months of preparation which would either result in a finding that a rescue was impossible, or in launching an attempt long after the hostages had been moved or killed.

That, after all, is exactly what happened in 1970, when American raiders attacked the Son Tay prison in North Vietnam to rescue POWs and found the camp long since evacuated.

The Son Tay raid followed a non-decision process that began with "briefings" on May 25, 1970 and continued with "plan discussions," "reviews of alternatives," the formation of a 25-person "feasibility study group," more "reviews" and "briefings" until the raid was finally launched five months later—too late for the POWs. (The planners had insisted, among other things, on thousands of aerial photographs involving many overflights, which may have tipped the American hand.)

The same pattern was manifest in the Iran rescue attempt, for which preparations lasted nine months. In contrast, five days elapsed between hijack and rescue in the successful 1976 Israeli Entebbe raid; and there was a response just as quick in the West German rescue of the Lufthansa passengers held hostage in Mogadishu that same year.

Since those days, the United States has spent a great deal of money on special-operations forces, which to be sure have many other functions than just rescuing hostages. They have a new headquarters, with high-ranking officer billets, as well as a supporting agency inside the Joint Chiefs organization with more high-ranking officers, and the Navy has joined in the bureaucratic competition as well, expanding its SEAL force and forming its own specialized hostage-rescue team.

And yet it is almost certain that if a rescue of the Lebanon hostages had been attempted, only Druze mercenaries or some other foreign force could have done it in timely fashion—not because of any reluctance on the part of those who would have risked their lives in Beirut (Delta troopers are not lacking in courage) but because of the reluctance of those who would had to take a bureacratic risk in order to send them. Had North gone through channels, the chances are that an elaborate feasibility study would have been produced, and not a rescue.

Maybe it's necessary to have such exhaustive intelligence studies, with their tell-tale aerial photography, special training on full-scale mock ups that take weeks to build, and all other such prolonged preparations. But if that is truly so, we can save ourselves the cost of keeping the two separate Army and Navy specialized hostage-rescue forces, because hostages are most unlikely to be kept in one place long enough for our rescuers to get to them. And certainly a lucky intelligence break that pinpoints their location will only be valid for a short while at best.

We should remember that the British, Dutch, West German and Israeli rescues that have actually succeeded were planned and done very quickly, with whatever scrappy intelligence could be gathered in a hurry, and with risky improvisations all the way. There is simply no such thing as a prudent rescue operation of the sort that our prudent planners insist upon.

Then there is the subject of money. As we learn from the Tower Commission's report, even when Messrs. McFarlane and North finally realized very late in the day that Iranian middleman Manucher Ghorbanifar was not merely out to make large profits but was also endangering their venture by constantly misleading Americans and Iranians alike, and had therefore decided to cut him out as an intermediary, they were still forced to rely on Ghorbanifar because they needed his services as a financier. Army officials would not release the TOW missiles without being paid for them in advance while the CIA for its part could not, or would not, provide a bridging loan pending the Iranian payment. Our legislated regulations merely created a procedural complication that kept Ghorbanifar in business for one more deal.

Our bureaucratic procedures also prevent us from helping friends in need. Congress alone can authorize the disbursement of funds—its power of the purse is the essential instrument of democratic control. But purely because of the rigidities of the congressional calendar and its awkward committee structure, the U.S. goverment finds itself unable to provide the small amounts of money that can make a real difference if they are provided in a hurry. Indeed, we're incapacitated even when Congress would certainly approve the disbursement if its own internal procedures did not prevent a quick decision.

In reaction to that state of affairs, a practice evolved long before the the Reagan administration whereby American officials have asked other countries—such as Saudi Arabia—to provide interim financial help in cases of urgent need. The money requested from the Sultan of Brunei for the contras and now missing, according to the Tower Commission report, is a recent example of this approach. The difference is that the request was a circumvention of the expressed will of Congress.

But when the Carter administration asked the Saudis to provide money for Somalia in 1977, it wasn't trying to circumvent the will of Congress, but only to make up for the slowness of its procedures. And indeed, Congress did vote financial help for Somalia in its own sweet time. The practice is obviously open to all sorts of abuses, and it greatly detracts from the dignity of the U.S. government. (For one thing, foreign potentates thus solicited by American officials may well believe that they have paid bribes for the personal benefit of those involved.) But it's a response to the rigidities of the system.

Here again, a specific abuse uncovered by the Tower report reveals an institutional rigidity that can and should be remedied. Instead of legislating new restrictions, Congress could serve the national interest much better by setting up a procedure for the rapid disbursement of funds in small amounts to cope with genuine emergencies, so that in future cases that are not improper, there will be no temptation to rely on foreign potentates and dubious financiers.

The same is true of the supply of weapons to foreign countries, another accepted tool of American policy. Naturally, all such sales must also be approved by Congress. In the case of the Iran arms deal, Congress would presumably have rejected the sale out of hand if the matter had been presented to the appropriate committees as it certainly should have been. But what must be understood is that executive branch has no flexibility to supply weapons quickly, even in cases that are completely uncontroversial.

The obstacle is the dense thicket of post-Vietnam regulations. Despite the inferiority of most of its weapons, the Soviet Union is the preferred supplier of countries that actualy need weapons to fight with and cannot wait until next year's independence-day parade for their delivery—simply because the U.S. government is prohibited from keeping reserve stocks of weapons in hand for the purpose.

When disaster strikes and the United States needs to ship weapons urgently to an ally, we have to strip our own combat units of their weapons—not a good idea in a crisis, when our forces should be strengthened rather than weakened. Yet that's just what happened after Oct. 14, 1973, when Israel was resupplied out of inventories in Germany and the United States, just as we were heading toward a confrontation with the Soviets in which we went to the "Def-Con 3" war-readiness level. In that case, Congress discovered that legislation left behind by previous Congresses thwarted its own freedom of action, as well as that of the executive branch.

Two conclusions emerge very clearly from a reading of the Tower Commission's report. First, that the NSC's misdeeds were not sudden aberrations but rather the outgrowth of long-standing activism, which was in turn a natural reaction to the inertia and rigidities of government departments that are supposed to be operational. And second, that North would not have been given such wide (and as it turns out, excessive) responsibilities were it not for the reluctance of others much senior to him to accept their own assigned responsibilities.

Above all, let us not make heroes of those who escaped guilt for having acted improperly in the Iran-contra affair only because of their consummate skill in avoiding action altogether.

Edward Luttwak's latest book, "Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace," will be published in May by Harvard University Press.